Thinkers or Philosophers?

Review of N. O. Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy*

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Review of N. O. Lossky, *History of Russian Philosophy* (New York, [1951]: International Universities Press; London, [1952]: Allen and Unwin), *The Times Literary Supplement*, 27 March 1953, 197–8

NOTHING is less similar in style and method to the works of the great Russian novelists than great Russian philosophical prose. For it is either stiff with the ecclesiastical elaboration of its Byzantine origin, solemn, dark and over-ornate, often at once confused and confusing, yet at times majestic in style and hypnotic in its effect; or, when it comes under the influence of Western models, it acquires every fault of the German Romantic metaphysicians, and spreads more obscurity than light. At its worst it is a repellent compound of the two, scarcely intelligible in terms of itself, and not translatable into the direct, sensuous, image-laden, fresh, subtle

and precise language which the Russian imaginative writers have used for the description of life.

The magniloquence and opaqueness of Russian philosophical writing are clear symptoms of its profound lack of confidence in its own reality and value: the vast polysyllabic periods create a protecting wall between the Russian philosophers and their scepticism about their subject; for it has never been clear to its own practitioners, still less to its foreign students, how far their activity exists, or whether, indeed, it exists at all. Is it possible, asks the latest historian of this uncertain subject, that the Russians, to whose artistic and intellectual gifts only a fool or a lunatic could be blind, should have contributed nothing in a field where the intellect and the imagination have united most fruitfully? Yet the answer to this question, put in a tone of indignant incredulity, is by no means self-evident. Nature seems to disregard the claims of strict egalitarian justice between nations in distributing her gifts. Where are the great German or Italian novelists, the great American composers, the great Russian painters? One is reminded of a lecture once delivered by an eminent Balkan historian, who spoke of the varieties of national genius as it expressed itself in the different philosophical traditions. After reciting the names of celebrated German, French and British philosophers, he said: 'And now, you may ask, what of Romania? Romania has given the world – the immemorial wisdom of the peasant.'

The case of Russia is not quite so hopeless. Russian thinkers there have been – thinkers, but not eminent philosophers. The frontier between these categories may be vague, but it exists, and the familiar borderline cases merely serve to emphasise the differences between those who obviously and conspicuously feel on one side or the other of this frontier. There is a clear sense in which Descartes or Kant, or even Schopenhauer, would naturally be described as celebrated philosophers – a sense in which, say, Lessing or Diderot or Goethe or Fénelon could not be so described, original, fascinating and influential as their ideas may have been. The topics and the methods of philosophers change from one age and one culture to another, but it is possible to

distinguish between those who deal in general ideas (sometimes with genius) as against those who are professionally occupied with the topics and the methods which constitute philosophy proper (sometimes very tediously and mechanically) as it has been understood in the West since the days of Aristotle – namely, the disciplines of logic, epistemology, ethics and metaphysical speculation, carried on systematically, that is, in accordance with recognised and teachable rules. The Russians have had a full share of thinkers in the first and larger sense; from the fathers of the early Russian Orthodox Church to the dissident priest Avvakum, from the 'philosophers of life', the moral, metaphysical and social frameworks of the great novelists Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, to the smaller but strongly individual and immediately recognisable worlds of Belinsky and Saltykov or Gorky, Russian literature has been full of didactic zeal, inspired from first to last by the ideal, and the activity, of testifying to the truth.

But although specific beliefs, and even doctrines, lie at the heart of the work of many great writers – of none more than the Russians – this does not, except in some loose and popular sense of the word, constitute them philosophers; and when G. H. Lewes, whom no one would accuse of pedantic professionalism, wrote his history of philosophy, he would have been surprised, and justly so, if someone had complained that he had not discussed the thought of George Eliot – or of Victor Hugo or Shelley or Carlyle. In spite of all the cross-currents and the affinities, the dimness of the borderlines, the two territories remain distinct, on one side philosophy, on the other general criticism, or the history of civilisation, or general reflections about life or thought or art.

The Russians have provided some of the most strikingly formulated, as well as most profound, *aperçus* into social and political and personal life. From Radishchev and Chaadaev to Herzen and Bakunin, from Leont′ev and Dostoevsky to Plekhanov and Mikhailovsky, they have offered descriptions and analyses of ideas and predicaments second to none in power of illumination. But then this might be said with equal justice of Saint-Simon and Renan, Carlyle and Newman, Bagehot and Arnold and the younger

Oliver Wendell Holmes. Their *pensées* may be new and important, and the philosophy of their time shallow and derivative, and still the difference remains: it is a difference in content, method, purpose, results. In this technical sense, then, can we speak properly of Russian philosophy, and even if we can, is it worth discussing?

Before we reply to these questions, it is obviously right to consider what this latest historian of Russian philosophy offers in evidence. He divides his book into chapters, sections and sub-sections – some of these consisting of a few words only – and the exposition lumbers uneasily from lengthy condensations to crabbed little summaries, occasionally abandoning all effort at continuous exposition and meandering helplessly like an overblown and badly organised catalogue raisonné, the whole written in an English which bears little resemblance to the language either of scholarship or of literature. The publisher's 'blurb' speaks of it as readable and clear. It has both these qualities in the sense in which expressive pidgin English can be said to be at once readable and clear; and naive and bizarre too, but in the end more embarrassing than comical – like the English of a distinguished, deeply serious and earnest foreign missionary, who uses inappropriate expressions about topics sacred to him, because he has learned his English partly from schoolboys of an earlier generation, partly from obsolete conversation books. The effect is not so much ludicrous as undignified and pathetic.

Professor Lossky's approach to his subject is disarmingly candid and simple. He makes clear that he is himself a believing Christian of the Orthodox Church, and although he does not completely identify philosophy with theology, he tends to regard a philosophy as valuable or interesting in proportion as it preaches the truth, that is, the metaphysics of Christianity as he himself conceives it. He concentrates his attention, therefore, upon philosophies with strong theological affinities, and his history is, in effect, **[198]** an account of Christian philosophers of Russia, and of those metaphysicians and poets whose thought is relevant to this central theme.

This is typical of the peculiar state of the subject. It is a strange, and indeed, grotesque fact that studies of Russian philosophy, whatever their language, at present tend to fall into two mutually exclusive kinds, neither of which is chiefly concerned with philosophy in the usual contemporary Western sense of the word. On the one hand there are the official Soviet histories and monographs, justly denounced by Professor Lossky as crude travesties executed by official hacks and sycophants; these treat as philosophers only those who can be more or less plausibly represented as 'materialists', or political radicals, from the late eighteenth century to the fathers of Russian socialism, of whom four, and only four, have achieved official apostolic status (Belinsky, Herzen, Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov). Lenin and Stalin soar above the categories; above even Marx and Engels: omniscient and infallible, their genius is universal and defies classification. The majority of such canonical social, political, economic and literary essayists whose works and lives are of cardinal importance in the Russian revolutionary tradition are scarcely philosophers in the normal, semi-technical Western sense of the word; tacked on to them in the official Soviet works of reference is a motley collection of more or less left-wing critics and pamphleteers who 'failed to overcome' various intellectual and social defects (that is, cannot be regarded as full-fledged Marxists), plus one or two 'mechanistic' natural scientists, who are accorded honourable mentions of varying degrees of approval.

This list automatically excludes all thinkers tainted with 'Idealism', all opponents of Marxism and all academic metaphysicians, logicians, epistemologists, moralists – in short, all those whom Western philosophers would have recognised as being in some sense scholars and thinkers. This suppression naturally provokes émigré historians to redress the balance: consequently their histories of philosophy tend to mention almost anyone remotely connected with philosophical studies, and their pages are often no better than directories of the names of third-rate metaphysicians and theologians. They debase the currency in their own way; and the reader is, in either case, presented with a knock-

kneed collection of provincial practitioners decked out to resemble an intellectual renaissance.

The situation is extremely bizarre: few readers passing from the compilations of one side to those of the other could possibly tell that they professed to treat the same subject. It is somewhat as if there were two parallel types of current histories of British philosophy: the first, published by the government press, might begin with Bacon and Hobbes, and, dealing in quick succession with Boyle, Newton, Mandeville, Priestley and Reid, and then hurrying without a break to Darwin, Huxley, Bradlaugh, Bernard Shaw, Professors J. B. S. Haldane and Hyman Levy, would continue with brief and patronising mentions of Locke and Mill, some deprecating asides about Hume, Hyndman and Bertrand Russell (with a grudging recognition of their services against religion), and end with brief onslaughts on Duns Scotus, Berkeley, Carlyle, Bradley, Keynes, Professor Joad and the 'morass of bourgeois Idealism' in general. The counterblast to this (produced by the Free British Movement in exile) would deal mainly with Erigena, Anselm, Grosseteste, William of Occam, Hooker, Jeremy Taylor, the Cambridge Platonists, both the Butlers, then after briefly surveying Blake, Coleridge, the Oxford Movement, Newman, Kingsley and Francis Thompson, would proceed slowly by way of Bosanquet, von Hügel, Bishop Gore, Archbishop Temple and Claude Montefiore to Whitehead, Bridges, Collingwood, Charles Williams, Dean Inge, a dozen Gifford lecturers, W. H. Auden and C. S. Lewis; appending by way of impartiality brief accounts of the views of Godwin, Boole, Jevons, W. D. Ross and the late Professor Laski.

While any analogy between a Western philosophical tradition which, like the British, contains professional thinkers of genius who have radically altered the methods of philosophy, and Russian philosophy, which has not produced a single philosopher of the first order, is necessarily misleading, yet this may perhaps be the only method of conveying to an English reader ignorant of Russian the situation at present prevailing in this field of Russian studies. Lossky's volume falls squarely into the second of the two classes

of histories of philosophy; and, interesting as it may be to students of theology and the philosophy of the Christian religion, it has too little to say to the modern student of philosophy.

Of Professor Lossky's four hundred pages, only seventy are devoted to the early Slavophils, who are treated with sympathy, together with their opponents, who are viewed more coldly. Another forty or fifty pages deal with various logicians and metaphysicians of a more or less Western type. The rest is dedicated largely to metaphysical theology, and not least to the author's own views, both metaphysical and epistemological. If this is a just distribution of emphasis, it merely proves that Russian philosophy is not a subject of sufficient importance to deserve a history. It may be pleaded that no other contribution to philosophy has, after all, been made in Russia; than nothing said by Russians has, in fact, made any appreciable difference to the philosophical views of the rest of the world; but this would not be altogether just. The social criticism of art as practised (and, in effect, invented) by Belinsky and his followers was an original step both in aesthetic and in social theory. Even if Plekhanov exaggerated Belinsky's claims in describing him as a sociologist of genius, his contribution is, in its own way, as lasting as that of Diderot or Nietzsche. Again, Herzen's brilliant improvisations against utilitarian morality or Hegelian historicism, fragmentary as they are, are a good deal more original and deadly than most academic arguments on these subjects. Even so, such writers would not normally be classified as philosophers; they are publicists, critics, revolutionary conspirators, *penseurs*. Who, then, were the true Russian philosophers?

The first figure whom Professor Lossky deems fully worthy of this title is Vladimir Solov′ev. His views are described at length; and since Solov′ev was a man of extraordinary personality and gifts, a saint, a visionary and a noble poet, and since his views are not even now at all well known to Western readers, this must be regarded as being, to some degree, a service. Solov′ev was, of course, in the first place a theologian and a Christian philosopher, but scarcely a figure in the central tradition of secular Western

philosophy, and, as a thinker, more closely related to von Hügel or Tyrrell, and to Kierkegaard or Unamuno or the Buddhist sages, than to the great Western logicians, epistemologists and metaphysicians; neverthe-less, even if no more than a clear exposition of his theosophical views had been provided, it would have been mere pedantry to complain the he deserved no place in a history of philosophy. Unfortunately, Professor Lossky's account of him leaves us little richer, if no poorer than we were before.

From Solov′ev we move to Chicherin. Chicherin was by no means wholly unimportant: he was a very scholarly legal and economic historian. His refutation of earlier Slavophil theories of the Russian commune had epoch-making results politically, as well as historically. As a philosopher, however, his deserts are more doubtful: he proposed various modifications of the Hegelian triad; he tried to adapt the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity to the Hegelian dialectic; he was a thinker of a type – and of a degree of intellectual merit – all too commonly found in the 1840s and 1850s in Germany and, indeed, in various diluted forms, beyond her borders. Victor Cousin or Gioberti are giants beside him. The stature he attains in Professor Lossky's pages serves only to mark the flatness of the surrounding country.

The other figures of this queer procession are even smaller and less interesting. Nor are they shown to best advantage in this presentation, for which the author cannot be alone to blame. It is a sad experience to have to read page after page compounded of sentences of which the following are random samples:

> The reasonable subject is able to abstract himself from all relative determinations, that is, he can attain complete indetermination to self-determination; and he is at the same time able to restrain himself, that is, he preserves the ability to pass from each determination back to complete indetermination.

It is this kind of expository prose that brings Hegel and his disciples into justified disrepute. Or again:

> In Platonism the idea is throughout an antinomically interpenetrating, meaningful play of meanings, so that meaning passes into its 'opposite' into it. In Aristotelianism (occasionally called Aristotelism) the idea has the static Nature of thinghood and in this respect it is absolutely immoveable, and there is no transfusion of meanings; there is a static meaning poised on the immovable power of facts, so that there is no complete freedom in the dialectical play of meaning with itself […]. This is because Plato's ideology and antinomics [is understood by Plotinus] dynamically and energically.

Whether this passage is quoted from the author in question (Losev), or is Professor Lossky's interpretation, Professor Karl Jaspers himself could hardly hope to do much better. The author, after speaking of Grot's 'spacious energic processes', regards him as 'founding himself on his own teaching'. This is followed by mystifying discussions on what to do 'in order that you may know how to confer a dream'. On the other hand, a phrase like 'after the death of Nicolas I the air breathed freedom' has a certain charm. As for the author's tendency to describe almost every philosopher referred to as liable to be 'keen' or 'very keen' on this or that theological dogma or metaphysical method – that, and much else like it, should lie heavily on the consciences of Professor Lossky's faithless English friends and advisers.

The book teems with misprints and misspellings, and it has been very poorly edited. Surely some competent reader could have amended paragraphs in which Professor S. L. Frank is said to be at once dead and alive (this is not an isolated case), or the well-known philosopher Ernst Cassirer appears as Kassierer; Professor Shpet (or Spaeth) appears equally as Spet and Schpet; Parmenides is at times Parmenid; the publisher Kraevsky appears as Kzaevich. There are too many alternating spellings of the names of Belinsky, Nadezhdin and Chernyshevsky; there is talk of Moscow, the Tower of Babylon and the famous classical comedy *Woe Vrom Wit*, and so on almost without end. It would be ungenerous to point out these blemishes were it not that the book is disfigured by them to a fantastic degree. Nor are the other obstacles which face the reader

much less formidable: the author's repetitions, overlapping of text owing to lack of revision, long and obscure accounts of trivial or irrelevant thinkers (for example, Merezhkovsky), suddenly broken by short paragraphs containing bald lists of five or six names and dates like entries in a street directory, give page after page a surrealist effect; the wild disproportion of space whereby third-rate followers of some forgotten German mystic obtain more attention than such interesting and original writers as Leont′ev or Bakunin, who moulded the thought of generations; brief and apparently capricious comments on the 'philosophies' of somewhat arbitrarily selected modern poets, Minsky, Bely, Ivanov, yet virtually nothing dealing directly with, for instance, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, save for references made to them by others; a running defence of the author's own brand of 'intuitivistic' epistemology against various critics, adduced in and out of season – all these are, to say the least, grave shortcomings in what might have been an authoritative account of the views of Russian thinkers in terms both of Western and native sources, and of their interrelations (with an assessment of the degrees of their originality), provided for the benefit of the largely ignorant and curious foreign reader.

It is only fair to add that the other histories of Russian philosophy, both Soviet and émigré, and available only in their native tongue, perform these tasks no better. Professor Lossky can with justice blame his assistants and publishers for lack of adequate care for his text, but even they could not have prevented a compilation from appearing to be what it is. It should be added that, in spite of their unsightly garb, the contents of this book reveal a thinker of great culture and erudition, patent sincerity, deep moral sensitiveness and the most exquisite intellectual courtesy. Nor has any writer since Diogenes Laetius told us so many charming and amiable anecdotes about the lives of philosophers. But this is no substitute for the indispensable minimum of brass tacks.

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